

CANON LISTS NOTES

Marcion - He rejected the Old Testament entirely and regarded the God depicted there as an inferior Being. Jesus had come to liberate mankind from the authority of the God of the Old Testament and to reveal the superior God of goodness and mercy whom he called the Father. Marcion did was to set up a canon, a definite group of books which he regarded as fully authoritative, replacing all others. These comprised ten of the Pauline epistles (without the Pastorals) and Luke's Gospel. He seems to have edited these books, purging them of what did not accord with his views.

The Muratorian Canon: This document gives a list of the canonical books with some comments. It was discovered in 1740 by the antiquarian L.A. Muratori. It is believed to have been written in Rome towards the end of the second century. It is the earliest extant document in which the canon is treated in a formal fashion. It lists all the books of our New Testament except Hebrews, James and 2 Peter. There is also a question as to whether 1 Peter is mentioned. It includes one book, the *Apocalypse of Peter* (2 Peter?), which was subsequently rejected. The author of the Muratorian Canon himself has his hesitations about the book, for he notes that some do not accept it. The main value of the Muratorian Canon is that it indicates the books which were recognized as canonical in the Roman church towards the end of the second century. In this document we are already very close to our New Testament.

The Muratorian fragment lists a Canon of New Testament books.

The Muratorian fragment which is an ancient archeological manuscript dating back around AD 200 lists a Canon of New Testament books. It recognizes all the books except Hebrews, James, the 2nd. Peter, and 3rd John.

Irenaeus (ca.130-200), whose writings are contemporary with the Muratorian list, presents the same picture. His evidence is significant in that he was a rather ecumenical figure in his day. He spent his earlier life in Asia Minor and his later life in Gaul. He was also in close touch with Rome. He does not seem to have had Hebrews in his canon, and there is some uncertainty as to whether he accepted the general epistles (except 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John). He refers to the *Shepherd of Hermas* as "scripture" but does not include it in the list of apostolic writings.

Tertullian (ca.160-220) is our authority for Africa. He appears to have had 22 books in his canon — the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude and Revelation. He did not treat Hebrews as canonical.

Origen (ca.185-254) in the East has a good deal to say about the canon. According to F.F. Bruce, "He acknowledged the four canonical Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline epistles and Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation as 'undisputed' books."²⁴ Origen does acknowledge, however, that Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude were rejected by some.

By the end of the second century the canon was taking shape throughout Christendom. Twenty-three of the twenty-seven books are unquestionably part of the authoritative collection at this time. Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Revelation, the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas and 1 Clement have a doubtful position. The canonization process was hastened during the second century because of the catalytic activity of heretical groups.

Eusebius (ca. 260-340)

With him we reach a very important landmark in the history of the canon. He provides us with a full statement in which he explains the position taken up in the Church at large. He makes an important distinction between *homologoumena* ('recognized books') and *antilegomena* ('disputed books') as follows:

The recognized books are the Gospels, Acts, the epistles of Paul (including Hebrews), 1 Peter, 1 John, and "perhaps Revelation" (if written by the apostle).

He divides the disputed books into two sub-classes: (1) those that ought to be included in the canon — James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John. (2) those that ought not to be included — the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Didache, Barnabas and "perhaps Revelation" (i.e. if not apostolic).²⁷ Apart from his hesitation on Revelation Eusebius' New Testament is identical to ours.

Athanasius (296-373)

The first time we have a list of the New Testament books which coincides exactly with our New Testament (containing no more and no less) is in the thirty-ninth Festal Letter of Athanasius (367AD). He circulated it in the administration of his pastoral duties to advise his clergy of the date of Easter, etc. He makes a sharp distinction between "canonical writings" (the 27 books and these alone) and "those worthy of reading" (Old Testament Apocrypha²⁸, The Shepherd and the Didache). Having listed the canonical books in his Festal

Letter Athanasius then adds: "These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these." ²⁹

Decisions of Councils

The Greek Church: Athanasius' letter takes on judicial force and no conciliar decision is needed.

The Latin Church: The Synod at Rome in 382 recognized the 27 books and them alone as canonical. (Jerome's Vulgate which appeared shortly after this contained the 27 books).

The African Church: The synods at Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 ratify the synod at Rome.

\The Syrian Church: The Peshitta version which includes 22 New Testament books omits 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation. The native (as opposed to the Greek speaking) Syrian Church recognizes only the more limited canon of the Peshitta to the present day.

The Ethiopian Church acknowledges the canonical books of the larger Christian Church plus eight additional works dealing primarily with church order.

So although the consensus was not perfect, by the end of the fourth century the New Testament canon is officially fixed in the sense of being ecclesiastically defined and universally accepted. From this time on there was no real challenge to the canon until the time of the Enlightenment.

Luther's Canon

Christological Concentration: This was Luther's criterion of canonicity. He used the motto: "*Was Christum treibet und prediget*" ('what urges and preaches Christ'). In practice this approach resulted in "a canon within a canon." Luther relegated four books to a secondary position, putting Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation at the end of his New Testament in a detached position. Hence this criterion tends to destroy the canon in any traditional sense of the term. It can vary to the extent that the person applying the principle thinks what "urges Christ." However, the churches of the Reformation (including the Lutherans) held more closely to the views of Calvin than those of Luther in these matters and the 27 books of the New Testament maintained their position. (Luther's influence is still detected in some Bible translations of the period, e.g. Tyndale's which

places Hebrews and James with Jude and Revelation at the end of the New Testament collection).

Luther himself took the liberty of criticizing some of these books in a polemical manner which few Lutherans today would find completely acceptable. He had a low view of Hebrews, James, Jude, and the Revelation, and so when he published his New Testament in 1522 he placed these books apart at the end. In his Preface to Hebrews, which comes first in the series, he says, "Up to this point we have had to do with the true and certain chief books of the New Testament. The four which follow have from ancient times had a different reputation."